DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 096 699 CS 500 725

AUTHOR Ochs, Donovan J.
TITLE A Fallen Fortress: BIA, 1972.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 8p.; Paper given at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Speech Association (Milwaukee, April, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; Ethnic Stereotypes; Films; *Mass Media; Nonreservation American Indians; Propaganda; *Publicize; *Public Opinion; Reservations (Indian); *Stereotypes; Television

ABSTRACT

The use of the media to gain public acceptance of a group's ideology and policies is usually unsuccessful unless the group can create a newsworthy event, especially one that is unusual or that involves conflict. In the case of the Indian movement, the brief, superficial television coverage of the American Indian Movement's (AIM) take-over of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington in 1972, following years of negative filmic stereotyping of Indians, accomplished very little for the Indian cause. The take-over symbol simply reinforced the Hollywood image of the Indian as a wanton evildoer. Instead, AIM might have used creative disorders such as restaging the first Thanksgiving and serving broken treaties instead of turkey. To succeed rhetorically, the Indian movement must concern itself with its image as well as with its grievances and demands. (JM)

ED 096699

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Donovan J. Ochs
Rhetoric Program
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Donovan J. Ochs
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

A FALLEN FORTRESS: BIA, 1972

A paper presented to the
Central States Speech Association
Milwaukee, Wisconsin
April, 1974

When John Bowers and I tried to determine the role of the media in instances of agitation and control we observed that one necessary tactic -- promulgation -- is designed to win public acceptance of a group's ideology, their system of values and beliefs and policies. We said that this purpose obviously cannot be fulfilled unless an agitating group can get media coverage of that ideology in a form understandable to the public. We discovered that, in general, ideologies are not considered newsworthy. The media like to report events, especially unusual events and those involving conflict. Evidently, in the minds of editors, ideologies are dull to read, hear, or watch.[1]

Our focus was on media-coverage of agitation as it would occur during a confrontation. After studying the events surrounding the Bureau of Indian Affairs take-over in November of 1972, however, I am becoming convinced that people use media -- intentionally and unintentionally -- to create and foster attitudes which affect agitation outcomes. I hope to explain this statement first by discussing some of the constraints that films have placed on the Indian Movement and then by analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of the BIA take-over.

Many of us, I think, have viewed the CBS series, "Black History: Lost, Strayed, or Stolen." Bill Cosby narrated the first documentary

CS 500 735

in that series and demonstrated how black Americans were portrayed and characterized in films as LAZY, EASILY FRIGHTENED, FOOLISH, and usually MEEK HOUSE SERVANTS. I was reminded of this CBS series as I started research on the Indian Movement because most of my own beliefs about Indians originally came from the movies I watched in the forties, fifties, and early sixties.

None of us need a CBS budget or a Bill Cosby to recount those films. The character presented for emulation and approval to this pop-corn munching, eight-year-old was the virtuous, hard-working, family-defending, usually out-numbered cowboy. But there was nothing boyish about him. He could ride, rope, shoot, lead wagon trains, halt stampedes, and ride with the cavalry to save the endangered fortress. The characters presented for distrust, hatred, and disapproval were, of course, the Indians. Ralph and Natasha Friar chronicle the media portrayal of the Indian in their book, THE ONLY GOOD INDIAN...THE HOLLYWOOD GOSPEL. These authors describe the highly profitable and vicious stereotyping of the filmic Indian as "dirty, bad, evil, mean, cruel, shiftless, crafty, devilish, or just not nice."[2] No wonder that the kids who were told to "be Indians" in the schoolyard games of Cowboys and Indians would resist by crying or insist that in the next game they would get to be the cowboys -- kids who played "Indians" always got shot and killed -- that was simply the way the game was played.

To my knowledge Blacks were never portrayed as objects for justifiable attack and killing. Indians were. Marlon Brando's rejection of the Oscar Award because of the filmic brutality done to an entire race of people was grounded in fact.

What are some of the practical effects of such stereotyping? John Belindo, a Kiowa-Navaho, executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, testifying before the New York City Commission on Human Rights in 1968 said:

> The enhancement and perpetuation of stereotype motifs of the Indian as drunken, savage, or treacherous, unreliable or childlike, produces impeding effects on employability. It also lends itself to the generation of self-righteous justifications on the part of the non-Indian in application of commercial activities which have direct social and economic impact on the Indian.[3]

Belindo's understated, bureaucratic prose conceals some ugly facts. The 800,000 American Indians confront bleak existence. Their average family income is only $5,000. Their life expectancy is 7 to 10 years less than the national average. Their infant mortality is three times greater than the U.S. average. Their alcoholism and suicide rates are almost twice the national norm. Since drinking on their reservations is prohibited by federal law, Indians must drive to and from adjacent towns to buy a drink. As a consequence, four times as many American Indians die in car wrecks than the U.S. population in general.[4] Forty percent of the Indian population are unemployed. Those Indians who live on some of the Western reservations can expect to do without electricity, running water, and, often, food.

The rhetorical effects of filmic stereotyping, I contend, are equally forbidding. All agitation groups, to be successful, must increase their membership. Such groups need sympathetic support from the broader public. If Indians are perceived as either evil or inconsequential, then the

redefinition needed to gain potential members would seem to outstrip the talents of the best of the Presidential image-makers.

The Indians, specifically a militant group designated THE AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT (AIM), headed by Dennis Banks, were one group involved in the Bureau of Indian Affairs takeover. The second group was the BIA itself. For 150 years, the BIA has controlled Indian resources and almost every aspect of reservation life.

> It runs Indian schools, from which most students drop out by the sixth grade. It is responsible for many housekeeping chores on the reservations: building and maintaining roads, overseeing construction of irrigation projects and providing welfare assistance. But the BIA does not provide services to the nearly 350,000 Indians who live off reservations. With 13,964 employees -- 56% of them Indians -- the bureau is a lumbering monster, hopelessly inefficient.[5]

I place the beginning of the BIA takeover in late August of 1972 when Dennis Banks presented a list of demands to President Nixon's daughter at a Republican party reception.[6] The press covered the petition but, predictably, nothing was done. Within two weeks a series of unrelated events generated more publicity for the Indian movement. A protest occurred in Nebraska because 2 whites who killed an Indian were given minimal sentences; the BIA discontinued a 3 million dollar a year job training program for Indians in New Mexico and a coalition of California Indians filed a $15 billion dollar suit against the Federal Gov't for misrepresenting land values in a 1964 settlement. These events did keep the Indian cause before the country but the presidential campaign was in progress. Headlines were with the candidates, not the Indians.

A full two months before the Washington take-over a rehearsal took place in Oklahoma. Forty Indians seized the BIA office, presented demands, declared a victory and left. Then in early October, Vernon Bellecourt, national co-director of AIM, held a press conference to announce a series of automobile caravans scheduled to arrive in Washington on November 1. The TRAIL OF BROKEN TREATIES caravan arrived on schedule and Robert Burnette, a Rosebud Sioux, told the press that, "the Indians had deliberately chosen election time to voice their demands, not as a demonstration against the Nixon Administration, but to present an agenda for action on Indian problems by the next congress."[7]

On November 2 the protest moved to a confrontation. Taking their cue, perhaps, from the University of Chicago scenario of the late sixties, the BIA officials permitted the Indians to bivouac in the building and no arrests were made.

Television cameras focused on the windows of the BIA building and viewers across the country saw war-painted Indians brandishing spears made from broken office furniture. The fortress had apparently fallen. On November 8 the Indians left the building with two truckloads of documents and artifacts, an agreement with the White House that their grievances would be reviewed, $60,000 travel money, and an agreement that no one involved in the take-over would be prosecuted.

By the end of November, three assistant secretaries, two top officials, the director of the National Park Service, the Commissioner of Reclamation, and the BIA departmental solicitor were fired. A Congressional investigation into the BIA was begun and official questions about the $60,000 travel money and the estimated 2 million dollars of damage were raised in the hearings. The Department of the Interior proposed a massive

realignment of responsibilities in the BIA and the Justice Department re-interpreted the amnesty agreement so that prosecutions could begin. The fortress had not fallen after all -- the cavalry was just a bit slow in arriving.

Considered as an instrumental, symbolic attempt to change attitudes, the militant take-over accomplished very little for the Indian cause. Predictably, neither the Washington Post nor the New York Times carried the list of demands. I doubt if many Americans bothered to read the demands in the Indian newspapers, but that was the only place I could find a complete statement of AIM's proposals.[8] In other words no promulgation of the Indian's grievances occurred. Americans who watched the evening news on television saw pictures of a building in Washington with which they could not identify -- occupied by protesters who, apart from being Indians, seemed to be doing what Mario Savio had done at Berkeley in 1964, what Mark Rudd had done at Columbia in 1968, and what students across the country had done in 69 and 70. The tactic was, by 1972, a clichéd symbol. And, I contend, no agitation movement can afford to use clichéd symbols especially when the movement must attract and recruit, what Hans Toch calls, "susceptibles," new members sympathic to the cause. Rather than eliciting or inventing symbols that would re-define the Indian as a person of dignity and as a political force, the take-over symbol served instead to align the Indian with a by-then stale image of angry college students. Even worse, the take-over symbol reinforced the Hollywood version of the Indian as wanton evildoers. In my judgment the American Indian Movement used inappropriate rhetorical symbols and failed to differentiate itself from the filmic stereotype.

To gain favorable attention from the public, AIM might have used creative disorders such as restaging the First Thanksgiving and serving broken treaties instead of Turkey, or marching in all the televised holiday parades with banners proclaiming "Native Americans Have Nothing to Celebrate." To broaden its membership AIM could have allied itself with other oppressed groups or tried to secure legitimizing agents in Congress. In short, the Indian movement must concern itself as much with its image as it does with its demands and grievances if it is to succeed rhetorically.

Footnotes

[1]John Waite Bowers and Donovan J. Ochs, The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1971), p. 18.

[2]Ralph and Natasha Friar, The Only Good Indian...The Hollywood Gospel (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), p. 181.

[3]Ibid., p. 263.

[4]See, US News and World Report, November 20, 1972, p. 110; Time, March 19, 1973, p. 32; Parade Magazine, March 10, 1973, p. 5; Robert Burnette, The Tortured Americans (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1971); The Indian: America's Unfinished Business (comp.) William A. Brophy and Sophie D. Aberle (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966).

[5]Time, March 19, 1973, p. 31.

[6]I examined issues of The New York Times and The Washington Post from August, 1972 to February, 1973. Special thanks to Jane Feuer, my research assistant, for her help with this project.

[7]The New York Times, October 31, 1972, L. 31.

[8]See, Akwesasne Notes, January, 1973, pp. 30-31.